

The Vanishing Hitchiker

The graveyard gate creaked open, moaning. He stepped forward and peered through the fog which had completely engulfed the horizon.

‘Why am I here?’ he wondered to himself. He began walking towards the great aisles of gravestones. There must have been hundreds of the stone tablets, but somehow he knew which one he was looking for. He felt like he was being drawn to it...

He was called John Smith, and he was driving home to Barrhead after visiting his sister in Ayr. He had been driving for half an hour, and it was an hour’s drive, so he was looking forward to getting home to his father fairly soon. It was Boxing Day, and the radio had been playing the new Band Aid single for the last five minutes. Suddenly, heavy rain and hail started hitting off of the windscreen. John turned on the wipers, and then realised that he should turn on the lights as well. It was very dark for this time in the evening, even at this time of year. At that moment, static started interfering with the radio. John tried changing the station, but it was the same on every channel.

‘Ah well, that song went on for too long anyway,’ he muttered to himself. Then, into the distance he saw a lone figure standing at the side of the road. It was a young woman as white as a sheet. She looked so frail and helpless standing there alone, with the relentless elements rebounding against her. Although she didn’t seem to be trying to hitch a lift (in fact, she didn’t seem to be doing anything at all), he felt that he had to stop and offer her one. He would feel awful later on if he didn’t. He stopped the car and lowered the window, feeling the biting chill that flew in from the outside. He leaned out of the car and asked her where she was going and whether she would like a lift. She thanked him, and said that she would. As she walked towards the car and clambered into the back seat, John realised that she was limping badly. He asked her again where she was going, and she said that her home was only a few miles away. Just before starting the car again, John realised something.

‘You might want to buckle up your seatbelt’, he told the girl.

‘No. I’m alright,’ she replied.

As he drove the car towards her destination, John could feel the warmth draining away from the car. It was freezing. He watched the temperature gauge. Four degrees, three, two, one, zero, minus one... This was unreal. What on earth was happening? John looked at the back seat. The girl was shivering furiously; she must be frozen through. He took off his jacket and handed it to her.

‘Thank you...’ she moaned quietly.

John continued to drive, trying his best to ignore the flickering headlights, the icy windows, and the ever decreasing temperature. He soon arrived at a small house in a cut-away at the side of the road. There wasn’t anywhere else for miles.

‘This must be the place’, thought John. Just then, the radio crackled back into life halfway through another tedious Christmas song. The temperature started steadily rising and the headlights stopped flickering. John turned around to face the back seat.

‘Here we are —’ He stopped mid-sentence. The back seat was empty. The girl was nowhere to be seen.

John panicked. Had she fallen out of the car? No — he was being ridiculous. The doors were securely locked and the car had been moving the whole time. Surely he would have noticed if she had somehow left the car. But where was she? He unlocked the doors and stepped out of the car. He looked at the house that the girl had led him to, and decided to go inside. He couldn’t leave the situation hanging in the air like this. He needed answers.

John knocked on the door, and waited. There was no reply. Drenched with the rain, he was about to leave when it slowly opened.

‘Hello?’ It was an old woman. She looked like she hadn’t had much sleep.

‘I’m sorry to bother you at this time of night, but something rather strange has just happened to me,’ he explained.

She invited him in and he told her the story. Although he expected her to laugh, she did no such thing. She just looked very sad.

‘Wait one second,’ she said, and retreated to another room. She returned with a photograph frame in her hand, and handed it to him. ‘Is this the girl you saw?’ It was, and he told her so. She sighed.

‘She is my daughter. She died in a car crash on the way home from a Christmas party. That was a year ago today. I think that her spirit is still trying to come home.’

John was stunned. He couldn’t believe what this woman was saying, but he’d seen the evidence for himself. The girl in the photo *was* the same girl. He apologised again for bothering her and walked back to his car. On the way home, he felt a chill and realised that he was not wearing his jacket. He had given it to the girl.

The next day, John had still not been able to get the girl out of his head. He went to the local library and searched the archives for a copy of the paper of a year ago to the day. He soon found it, the story of a girl who had been killed in a car crash on her way home, not far from where he had picked her up. He left the library and went back to his car. There was one more thing that he had to check.

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And then he saw it. A grave that stood apart from the others. And different from the others, because his jacket was draped over it.